

Environmental Assessment Decision Notice

Environmental Assessment for Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks Region 3

Upper Big Hole River Arctic Grayling

Assisted Re-Colonization Project near Jackson, Montana

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks

Region 3 Bozeman

April 15, 2013

Proposed Actions

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) proposes to facilitate the recolonization of Arctic grayling into eleven locations in the upper mainstem Big Hole River, Governor Creek, and Warm Springs Creek [Candidate Conservation Agreements with Assurances (CCAA) Management Segments A and B]. The method would involve using Remote Site Incubators (RSIs) to hatch Arctic grayling eggs from the Big Hole River conservation broodstock directly into upstream sections of the mainstem Big Hole River and tributaries to expand the current distribution of grayling in the Big Hole River system.

Montana Environmental Policy Act

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks is required by the Montana Environmental Policy Act (MEPA) to assess significant potential impact of a proposed action to the human and physical environment. In compliance with MEPA, the draft environmental assessment (EA) entitled "Upper Big Hole Arctic Grayling – Assisted Re-Colonization near Jackson, Montana" was released on 11 March 2013, for a 30-day public comment period, which ended on 8 April 2013.

The draft EA was circulated to standard FWP Region 3 contact lists, and to local landowners, sporting groups, government and federal agencies. The draft EA was posted and remains available for viewing on the FWP webpage:

http://fwp.mt.gov/news/publicNotices/environmentalAssessments/developmentImprovementsAndEnhancements/pn_0305.html. Legal notices indicating release of the draft EA were sent to local media including the Bozeman Chronicle, the Billings Gazette, the Montana Standard, and the Helena Independent Record.

Summary of Public Comment and FWP Response

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks received a total of 5 comments. All of those comments were in support of the proposed action.

Comment 1. There were several comments received from the public that suggested an increased number of Incubators (RSIs) be installed or, at a minimum, using the highest number of RSIs proposed in the document (30) to re-colonize grayling in the project area.

Response: If approved, the Upper Big Hole Arctic Grayling Assisted Re-colonization project will be taking place simultaneously with the Rock Creek Re-Colonization effort downstream in the Big Hole watershed. The Arctic Grayling Recovery Office in Dillon, Montana, will be in charge of providing incubators, grayling eggs, and daily labor to install, maintain, and remove incubators at both project areas. Based on staffing needs required to successfully run the RSIs, the feasibility of running more than the proposed number of incubators is not possible or could at least compromise the success of the re-colonization effort by spreading resources too thinly between the two project areas. FWP agrees that an increased number of incubators would improve the chances of successfully re-colonizing the upper Big Hole River; however, based on past experience using RSIs in other locations to reintroduce grayling, labor and funding need to balance out with the required time needed to hatch the grayling effectively. FWP will work with organized groups (e.g., Anaconda Sportsmen) to explore how volunteer opportunities could expand the number of incubators deployed.

Issue 2. Comments were received regarding the expansion of the project area to include other tributary and mainstem Big Hole River sections upstream and downstream of proposed project area.

Response: Historically, grayling were documented in Upper reaches of the Big Hole River and tributaries as well as in the currently occupied mainstem and tributaries around Wisdom downstream to Divide. Because grayling are essentially absent upstream of Rock Creek Rd (south of Wisdom) and are exhibiting a positive trend below Rock Creek Rd, re-colonization efforts will focus unoccupied areas with the hope that grayling will re-establish in these waters and eventually join the larger grayling population downstream. FWP is not ruling out future RSI sites in other sections of the Big Hole watershed to expand the project area. However, based on land ownership, logistics (proximity to roads, ease of access, labor, funding), and habitat conditions, the proposed project area was selected because it met the requirements FWP felt were necessary for the best chance of grayling survival and therefore project success. Through numerous habitat projects and streamflow agreements, the factors limiting grayling presence in the project area have been addressed and conditions will continue to improve as more projects are implemented through the Arctic Grayling Candidate Conservation Agreements with Assurances program. FWP's philosophy is that Arctic grayling re-colonization efforts will fail without addressing the limiting habitat factors and ensuring connectivity between habitats. FWP knows that working with landowners to develop restoration and enhancement projects is paramount to the future presence of Arctic grayling in the Big Hole River. The proposed project will be evaluated each year and, if necessary, could be expanded to include other sections of the Big Hole Watershed presuming that those areas have suitable habitat conditions and meet the requirements necessary for grayling to successfully re-colonize.

Issue 3: FWP received one comment suggesting the development of a “well thought out monitoring plan to evaluate RSI success with an Adaptive Management approach”.

Response: The success of RSIs will be determined by monitoring and enumerating the emergence of Arctic grayling fry. The ultimate success of the project will be determined by electrofishing surveys within the re-colonization area to detect the presence of Arctic grayling and ideally evidence of successful natural reproduction (young-of-the-year Arctic grayling) in the years following RSI use.

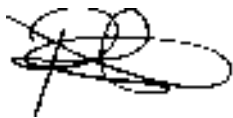
Final Environmental Assessment:

Based on public comment, there are no modifications necessary to the Draft Environmental Assessments. The Draft Environmental Assessment, together with this Decision Notice, will serve the final documents for these proposals.

Decision

Based on the Environmental Assessment, public comment, and the need to conserve fluvial Arctic grayling and its habitat in the upper Big Hole River watershed, it is my decision to proceed with the effort to Assist Recolonization of Arctic grayling into the Upper Reaches of the Big Hole River near Jackson, Montana.

I find there to be no significant impacts on the human and physical environments associated with this project. Therefore, I conclude that the Environmental Assessment is the appropriate level of analysis, and that an Environmental Impact Statement is not required.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Patrick J. Flowers', with a stylized, cursive script.

Patrick J. Flowers
Region Three Supervisor